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THE U.S. NAVY'S "... *FROM THE SEA*" STRATEGY:

SIR JULIAN CORBETT REVISITED?

CORE COURSE 2 ESSAY

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Fundamentals of Military Thought and Strategy
Seminar H
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The U.S. Navy's "... *From the Sea*" Strategy:

Sir Julian Corbett Revisited?

This essay begins with a confession. Although I have been a naval officer for more than 20 years, I had never encountered the work of Sir Julian Corbett before arriving at the National War College. This might be more easily understood if Corbett was considered an obscure proponent of some limited aspect of naval strategy, but he is not. In fact, a cursory search of references on naval strategic thinking clearly identifies Corbett as one of but a handful of important writers on the use and effectiveness of sea power.

In my own defense and as a partial possible explanation of my ignorance, the research also indicates that Corbett was often overlooked by historians of the U.S. Navy, perhaps overshadowed by his American near-contemporary, Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan. Recent histories of the U.S. Navy by such well-known naval writers as former Naval Academy professor Kenneth Hagan, and retired Navy Captain Edward Beach, whose works of both fiction and non-fiction on naval matters have been widely read by naval officers, have dozens of references to the works of Mahan, but neither even so much as mentions Julian Corbett.¹

The British strategist fares only slightly better in former Navy Secretary John Lehman's book on his stewardship of a revitalized U.S. naval strategy during the Reagan administration. Lehman's controversial maritime strategy is often remembered more for its linkage to naval force

¹ See *This People's Navy*, Kenneth J. Hagan, The Free Press, New York, 1991, and also *The United States Navy*, Edward L. Beach, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1986.

structure: i.e. -- its intellectual justification of the need for a 600 ship navy with 15 carrier battle groups -- than for its strategic value. but this is an unfair assessment. If read completely, Lehman's formulation contains more than enough internal logic, historical references, and qualifying *caveats* to earn it a rightful place in the historical body of works on naval strategy

Unfortunately, while Lehman fully covers the traditional emphasis on "command of the sea" from Thucydides through Lord Nelson and on into Mahan, he makes but one reference to Sir Julian, with the additional slight of getting the surname wrong in the reference

While by 1984 we had one document containing a comprehensive maritime strategy, I was at pains to keep reminding the navy and the marine corps that, in the words of Sir Julian *Corbin*. "Nothing is so dangerous in the study of war as to permit maxims to become a substitute for judgment" ² (emphasis added)

Although several naval theorists do cover Corbett's contributions, including prominent navalists such as Colin Gray at Penn State University,³ it is clear that Mahan is king in U.S. Navy thinking. Or perhaps, *was* king is the more appropriate characterization. For while America's maritime strategy in the 1980's was awash in Mahanian concepts of global command of the seas and taking the battle to the enemy's fleets, those days are gone. The collapse of the Soviet empire and concomitant financial realities have reduced the Russian navy to near strategic irrelevance. The Director of Naval Intelligence has repeatedly said that, except for its still considerable

² Command of the Seas: Building the 600 Ship Navy, John F. Lehman, Jr., Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1988, page 130

³ See Colin S. Gray, The Leverage of Sea Power, The Free Press, New York, 1992, and The Navy in the Post-Cold War World, Gray, Penn State University Press, University Park, Pennsylvania, 1994 for excellent discussion and analysis of Corbett

submarine force, the Russian navy is in no condition today to challenge U.S. fleets in any theater of operations ⁴

The demise of the Soviet Union and the bipolar structure of international power politics had another, less obvious strategic implication for U.S. policymakers: the loss of our strategic “rival” also meant the loss of an effective “brake” on U.S. involvement in the seemingly endless array of regional disturbances which could negatively affect global U.S. interests. For more than a decade, the legacy of Vietnam combined with superpower stalemate to effectively limit U.S. military interventions outside our hemisphere. Suddenly, the calculus changed. In an era of “violent peace” characterized by increasing political instability and regional violence, the United States has become relatively “free” to choose when and where to become involved militarily.

It was against this strategic backdrop in the Fall of 1992 that the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps unveiled their joint strategic “white paper” entitled ... *From the Sea* ⁵. From its opening understatement that “the world has changed dramatically in the last two years” to its closing commentary on the future role of naval forces to “provide the Nation’s leaders with a full range of options to preserve regional balances, lay the foundations for coalition operations, provide assistance to Americans in danger, respond to crises of every type, and project decisive power

⁴ Statements made during interviews with Pentagon reporters, 1995-96

⁵ ... *From the Sea*. Preparing the Naval Service for the 21st Century, Joint U.S. Navy - U.S. Marines Corps white paper, October 1992. *Note:* I have specifically chosen to use the original document rather than the “update” *Forward From the Sea* signed in 1995 because the ’92 document remains, in my view, the controlling document. The cover letter to *Forward From the Sea* notes the enduring force of the original, and contributes little in the way of new strategic thinking.

ashore.”⁶ the document is wholly consistent with Corbett’s view of maritime strategy, although it flows from a slightly different basic assumption.

As noted by John Gooch in the course reading, both Corbett and Mahan shared the current U S Navy view on the importance of command of the sea.

Like Mahan, Corbett saw command of the sea as the central issue in naval warfare. Thereafter he disputed everything Mahan had said about it. To Corbett command of the sea was a relative and not an absolute. It could be either general or local, temporary or permanent. Where Mahan suggested that command of the sea was possessed by one side or the other, Corbett proposed that this state of affairs was highly unusual; normally the seas were uncommanded.⁷

During the Cold War, U S naval strategists focused on the anticipated battle with the Soviet navy for command of the sea, an intellectual enterprise which many would say culminated in the enunciated maritime strategy under John Lehman. With the advent of the 1990’s and the diminished power of Russian naval forces, overall U S “command of the seas” is considered a given by the drafters of ...*From the Sea*. The phrase appears only twice in the document. But an important distinction, reminiscent of Corbett’s emphasis on “sea control” rather than command of the seas, is made clear by the two citations:

Our ability to command the seas in areas where we anticipate future operations allows us to resize our Naval Forces and to concentrate more on capabilities required in the complex operating environment of the “littoral” or coastlines of the earth. *Mastery of the littoral should not be presumed. It does not derive directly from command of the high seas.* It is an objective which requires our focused skills and resources.⁸ (Emphasis added)

⁶ ... *From the Sea*, page 1 and page 11

⁷ John Gooch, “Maritime Command: Mahan and Corbett,” *Seapower and Strategy*, edited by Colin S. Gray and Roger W. Barnett. Tri-Service Press, London, 1989, pp. 39-40

⁸ ... *From the Sea* page 3 and page 7

The Navy's shift in focus "away from open-ocean warfighting on the sea toward joint operations conducted from the sea"⁹ is made possible by the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet navy. The new strategy reflects the changed nature of that threat as well as an appreciation for the way U.S. naval power has actually been used time and again since World War II: crisis response and expeditionary warfare.

The essential elements of the ... *From the Sea* strategy closely parallel many of the parameters of what Corbett called "naval" as opposed to "maritime" strategy. John Gooch neatly encapsulates the difference between the two:

Corbett drew a clear distinction between maritime strategy and naval strategy. By maritime strategy he meant the principles governing a war in which the sea is a substantial factor. Naval strategy is what determined the movement of the fleet after maritime strategy had determined what part the fleet should play in relation to land forces.¹⁰

The consideration of "what part the fleet should play in relation to land forces" is central to ... *From the Sea*. Although the aggressive maritime strategy of the 1980's intended to influence the continental military balance by threatening the "flanks" of the Soviet empire, its focus on engaging the Soviet navy far out to sea and other "blue water" operations made its relation to the land battle seem remote to many analysts. Colin Gray argues that many simply failed to grasp the strategic rather than operational nature of the relationship between land and sea operations.

To argue, in 1980's terms, that Soviet tank armies seeking to irrupt into Germany probably could not be stopped by the direct action of Western sea power -- even sea power equipped with *Tomahawk* cruise missiles -- shows a severe lack of grasp of the subject under debate. Major land powers can be overthrown only by action on land.

⁹ ... *From the Sea*, page 3

¹⁰ John Gooch "Maritime Command: Mahan and Corbett," page 39

directly against the bases of their strength, or through their internal political collapse . . . To notice . . . that Napoleon was beaten on land at Leipzig and finally at Waterloo, rather than at Trafalgar, is to notice only the obvious. To focus heavily on the consequences of battle on land is to risk failing to comprehend how, and by what means, the strategic conditions were established for defeat on the ground.¹¹

One current “strategic condition” for which there seems to be universal agreement among naval analysts, is that today there exists no credible challenge to the maritime supremacy of the U S and NATO allies. As one analyst put it, “We seem to be back to the question so perceptively asked by Samuel Huntington in 1954 – what do navies do when they have undisputed command of the sea?”¹² The answer, Geoffrey Till says, is simple but important: you can turn your attention ashore because “it was where they had an impact ashore that navies were at their most influential. Being strong at sea was simply an enabling capacity providing such leverage.”¹³

Current Navy leadership could not be more clear in their appreciation of the pivotal role of the Navy and Marine Corps as “enabling forces” to permit heavy, land-based ground and air forces to enter the wartime theater. From documents such as . . . *From the Sea*, to congressional testimony and other public statements, the theme is consistent. The phrase constantly used by senior Navy leaders for the past four years has been that naval forces do not win wars: their role is to deter conflict by forward presence and, if that fails, to secure the airfields and ports that will be used to bring the “war winning” forces to the fight. Corbett put it this way

¹¹ Colin Gray, *The Navy in the Post-Cold War World*, pp. 8-9

¹² See Geoffrey Till, “Maritime Strategy and the Twenty-First Century,” *Seapower: Theory and Practice*, edited by Geoffrey Till, Frank Cass & Company, Ltd., Essex, Great Britain, 1994, page 186.

¹³ Ibid.

Since men live upon land and not upon the sea, great issues between nations at war have always been decided – except in the rarest cases – either by what your army can do against your enemy's territory and national life, or else by the fear of what the fleet makes it possible for your army to do.

The paramount concern, then, of maritime strategy is to determine the mutual relations of your army and navy in a plan of war.¹⁴

Julian Corbett is frequently linked to B. H. Liddell Hart as proponents of limited warfare and the “indirect approach,” what some have called the “British way” in warfare.¹⁵ Clearly Corbett's emphases on dispersion of fleet units to both protect and attack seaborne commerce, open and closed blockades, and amphibious operations are consistent with Liddell Hart's overall strategic approach.

What makes Corbett so relevant to current U.S. naval strategy is that, unlike the time at which both he and Liddell Hart were writing when *unlimited war* appeared to be becoming the norm, today we see *clearly limited war* as the most likely use of the U.S. military. As Eric Grove noted in his Introduction to Corbett's Some Principles of Maritime Strategy

Corbett is modern in another sense, too. He recognizes, as his German mentor [Clausewitz] did, that limited objects produce limited wars. . . the post-1945 limited wars in which maritime forces have played such an important role would have come as little surprise to him [Corbett].¹⁶

After all, what did Corbett say history showed the actual “functions of the fleet” to be:¹⁷

¹⁴ Julian S. Corbett, Some Principles of Maritime Strategy, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, Maryland, 1988, page 16

¹⁵ Colin Gray, The Navy in the Post-Cold War World, page 46

¹⁶ Julian Corbett, Some Principles of Maritime Strategy, page xxvi

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, page 317

- The prevention or securing of alliances
- The protection or destruction of commerce
- The furtherance or hindrance of military operations ashore

Corbett's "functions of the fleet" closely parallel the current and future roles for naval forces laid out in ... *From the Sea*

- Operate forward to project a positive American image, build foundations for viable coalitions
- Bring to bear decisive power on and below the sea, on land and in the air
- Deny access to a regional adversary, interdict the adversary's movement of supplies by sea, and control the local sea and air.¹⁸

It is obviously possible to overreach when noting the similarities between Corbett's principles and U.S. naval thinking in the 1990's. There are important geostrategic differences between that era and today. And ... *From the Sea* notwithstanding, there are still many naval officers who find Mahan's focus on concentrating naval forces for decisive battles more compelling than Corbett's less direct approach. Nevertheless, I submit that the "big pieces" of the two strategies overlap significantly.

The most important connection is the subordination of "naval strategy" to the overarching "major strategy" being pursued, including the primacy of the political objectives. The next most important common element is the focus on the likelihood of limited wars, and the ability to shift

¹⁸ .. *From the Sea*, page 6 and page 8

focus away from achieving command of the seas and toward exploiting sea control in the region of interest or conflict.

Finally, but importantly, Corbett's significant emphasis on amphibious operations is thought by some to have been excessive.¹⁹ By ... *From the Sea* standards, it may have been too modest! If our current Navy and Marine Corps strategists have prognosticated well – and I believe they have – the need for mobile, pre-packaged expeditionary forces will only increase in the decade ahead. In short, the Navy - Marine Corps team at sea will remain the force of choice for military operations ranging from deterrence and crisis management to humanitarian assistance. As Geoffrey Till remarked, naval thinkers have

recast their theories and their concepts to focus more on power *from* the sea and less on power *at* sea. . . The ability to focus a higher proportion of naval effort on the projection of power ashore rather than on control of the sea would seem to imply that the leverage of seapower over the world's affairs will certainly not diminish in the future but on the contrary will probably grow.²⁰ (emphasis in original)

And now, one last observation, an appropriate one given the mission of the National War College. Throughout this paper the importance of relating seapower to objectives ashore has been underscored time and again. The logical and essential corollary of this, recognized both by Corbett and in ... *From the Sea*, is the need to coordinate closely between land (and air) and naval forces. Sir Julian never used the word "joint" but he certainly understood the concept! Corbett understood and sought to tap the synergy created by combined military operations that are in synch with the overall political objectives. That was "Grand Strategy" for Corbett:

¹⁹ John Gooch, "Maritime Command: Mahan and Corbett," page 44

²⁰ Geoffrey Till, "Maritime Strategy and the Twenty-First Century," page 186

Now, as Nelson lamented, where great empires are concerned, wars cannot be concluded upon the sea. Such wars cannot be made by fleets alone. But just as land operations demand the co-operation and just co-ordination of horse, foot, and artillery, and as sea operations demand the co-operation and just co-ordination of battleships, cruisers, and flotillas, so are *great wars conducted by the ordered combination of naval, military, and diplomatic force.*²¹ (emphasis added)

You know, if you add the Air Force to that last line, Sir Julian Corbett still looks pretty current in his strategic insights

²¹ Julian S. Corbett, England in the Seven Year's War: A Study in Combined Strategy Quoted in Colin Gray, The Leverage of Seapower, page 239

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